

# A Guide to the Common Core Writing Workshop

INTERMEDIATE GRADES



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*firsthand*  
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DEDICATED TO TEACHING

## Chapter 1

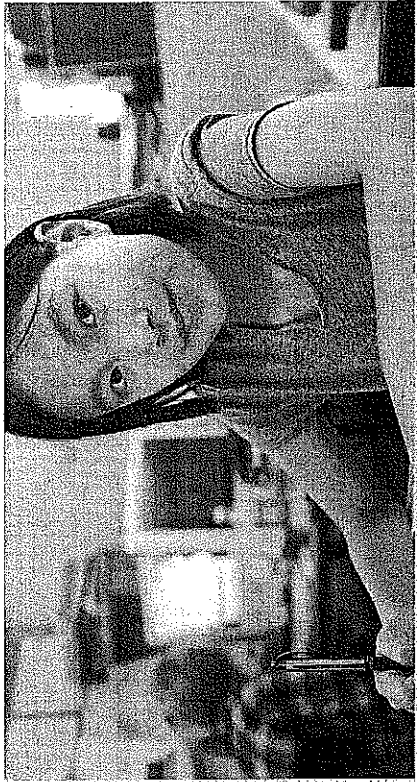
# A New Mission for Schools and Educators

*"The new mission . . . is to get all students to meet high standards of education and to provide them with a lifelong education that does not have built-in obsolescence of so much old-style curriculum but that equips them to be lifelong learners."*

—Michael Fullan, Peter Hill, and Carmel Grévola, *Breakthrough*

**I**N A WORLD that is increasingly dominated by big corporations and big money, it is easy for individuals to feel silenced. No one is more apt to be silenced than children, who too often grow up being taught to be obedient rather than to be wise, empathetic, and critical. The teaching of writing can change that. In a democracy, we must help young people grow up to know how to voice their ideas, know how to speak out for what is right and good.

The information age of today makes it especially imperative that young people, not just an elite few but all students, develop skills that are significantly more complex than those required of them in the past. In part, the increased focus on writing comes from the technological revolution that has transformed our lives. As the ways of communicating—text messaging, email, social media, search engines—seep into every nook and cranny of our day, all of us are writing more than ever. Today, it has become increasingly important for all children to be given an education that enables them to synthesize, organize, reflect on, and respond to the data in their world. Indeed, several years ago, the National Commission on Writing called for a "Writing Revolution," suggesting that children needed to double the amount of time they spent writing in their classrooms. Students need to be able to write not only narratives but also to write arguments and information texts. They need not only to record information and ideas but also to synthesize, analyze, compare, and contrast that information and those ideas.





# What Do the CCSS Say about Writing, and What Does This Mean for Us?

**T**HIS SERIES IS BEING PUBLISHED just as the United States sets out on an effort to lift the level of literacy instruction across all our schools, making sure that students enter college and twenty-first-century careers ready to flourish. As I've written in our recent professional book, *Pathways to the Common Core* (2012), the Common Core State Standards are a big deal. Adopted by forty-five states and the District of Columbia so far, the standards represent the most sweeping reform of the K–12 curriculum that has ever occurred in this country. It is safe to say that across the entire history of American education, no single document has played a more influential role over what is taught in our schools. The standards are already shaping what is published, mandated, and tested in schools—and also what is marginalized and neglected. Any educator who wants to play a role in shaping what happens in schools, therefore, needs a deep understanding of these standards.

If I were asked to describe the two or three most striking features of the Common Core State Standards, one of the things I'd say straightaway is that the standards place a tremendous emphasis on writing. In effect, the standards refocus the nation on students' proficiency as writers. NCLB, the last large-scale reform movement in literacy, called for an emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Writing was nowhere in the picture. In the Common Core State Standards, in contrast, writing is treated as an equal partner to reading, and more than this, writing is assumed to be *the* vehicle through which a great deal of the critical thinking, reading work, and reading assessment will occur. The CCSS, then, return writing to its place as one of the essentials of education.

In this chapter, I help you grasp the Common Core's rallying cry around writing and see how these units of study help you meet (and even, at times, exceed) these demands. This chapter looks specifically at:

- The standards' emphasis on three types of writing
- The relationship between the CCSS for writing and the Units of Study series

- The writing process described in the standards and taught in these units of study
- The standards' call for new levels of proficiency

In subsequent chapters in this guide, you'll see how the structure, focus, and content of the units align to—and are influenced by—the Common Core State Standards. You'll see the influence of the Common Core also as you read the individual lessons that lead students toward and beyond CCSS benchmarks.

## THE STANDARD'S EMPHASIS ON THREE TYPES OF WRITING

In the prelude to the Common Core Standards, there is a section entitled "Key Features of the Standards." This synopsis emphasizes that although the writing process applies to all kinds of writing, different types of writing place different demands on students.

The standards are organized in a way that highlights grade-specific expectations for three broad types of writing. The first standard delineates expectations for opinion and argument writing; the second, for information writing; and the third, for narrative writing. Although these three standards represent just under a third of the ten standards, if one were to count the pages devoted to the writing standards and count the pages devoted to explicating the three types of writing, one would find that these first three standards occupy fully half of the CCSS for writing. (The later standards illuminate how students should do the work of the first three standards. For example, students presumably will use the writing process detailed in standard 5, the writing process standard, as they write the argument, information, and narrative texts described in standards 1–3.)

It is interesting to note that the standards refer to these as *types* of writing and not as *genres*. This makes sense because within any one type of writing, one can lodge many different genres of writing. In the New Standards Project, an earlier effort to create nationwide standards, the committee of twenty (including me) who wrote those standards wrestled with the issue of *kinds* versus *structures* versus *types* versus *genres* of writing and came to the decision that the whole world of writing could be divided into five (not three)

*kinds* of writing: narrative, information, functional and procedural, persuasion and argument, and poetry. The Common Core State Standards' divisions are roughly in line with those earlier ones, although functional and procedural writing are now combined with information writing, and poetry is excluded.

You might, with colleagues, try jotting down the genres you would put under these major categories, and then consider how often your students have opportunities to engage in each of the three main types of writing. You will probably come up with lists like these.

- **Narrative writing:** personal narrative, fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, narrative memoir, biography, narrative nonfiction
- **Persuasive/opinion/argument writing:** persuasive letter, petition, persuasive speech, review, personal essay, persuasive essay, literary essay, historical essay, editorial, op-ed column, research-based argument essay
- **Informational and functional/procedural writing:** how-to book, directions, recipe, lab report, fact sheet, news article, feature article, blog, website, report, analytic memo, research report, nonfiction book

## The CCSS and Narrative Texts

Although the sequence of the first three anchor standards for writing starts with argument writing and ends with narrative writing, learners grow into these genres in just the opposite direction. Human beings grow up on narratives, on stories. We come to know our own parents by hearing their stories of growing up. We make friendships by sharing the stories of our lives. We get jobs and scholarships by telling the stories of our studies and careers. We stay in touch by regaling each other with the news of our comings and goings. We plan and daydream and work and worry in narrative; we recall and remember in narrative. We comprehend fiction and biography and narrative nonfiction by synthesizing what we read on one page, another, and another into narratives that we hope are coherent and satisfying.

Narratives are important not only because they are, as researcher Barbara Hardy says, the primary mode of knowing ("Narrative as a Primary Act of Mind" in *The Cool Web: The Patterns of Children's Reading*, 1977) but also because they are an essential component in almost every other kind of writing.

Listen to TED talks—models of persuasive and informative speaking—and you will find that mostly, those speeches are mosaics of stories. Read a terrific informational text, and you'll find that you are reading stories.

If you try to understand the narrative writing standards by turning immediately to the grade you teach and reading the descriptors for that grade, you'll probably find the expectations to be overwhelming. Before you dismiss the standards as unrealistically high, you need to read them in an entirely different fashion. Start with kindergarten, and read those grade-level skills for narrative. Imagine a very simple story that meets those descriptors. Then reread just the first subitem in the kindergarten narrative standard before looking to the right to note what added work first-graders are expected to do in narrative writing. The added work won't be much—and that will prove true as you progress through the narrative expectations. By proceeding in this way, reading in a horizontal fashion, setting the descriptors for each skill from one grade alongside those for the next grade and noting the new work that is added at each subsequent grade, you'll come to understand the trajectory along which writers can travel. It is this trajectory that we used when designing the narrative units in this series (and it is the information and opinion trajectories that we used for the information and opinion units). Using these incremental steps, this steady progression will, in fact, make the writing standards something that students can achieve, especially if they have the opportunity to grow up within a strong writing curriculum.

## The CCSS and Opinion/Argument Texts

Argument writing is a *big deal* in the Common Core State Standards. In fact, the writers include an entire section in Appendix A titled "The Special Place of Argument in the Standards" to emphasize their strong belief in argumentation. The section begins: "While all three text types are important, the Standards put particular emphasis on students' ability to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues, as this ability is critical to college and career readiness" (2010, 24). To support their argument, the authors refer to statements by college professors who each make additional claims for the centrality of argument in universities. Gerald Graff, for example, claims that the university is largely "an argument culture" (*Chuteless in Academe*, 2003, 24). It is with

this particular vision of university life that the standards writers mapped their expectations for argument writing from high school graduation backward.

This belief in the essential nature of argumentation, at least on the part of the writers of the standards, colors many areas of the CCSS document. There is a push for logical reasoning, analysis of claims, and reliance on clear evidence and evaluation of sources throughout the document.

The pace at which the opinion and argument standards develop is brisk when you study them longitudinally. Kindergarten and first grade begin simply enough, expecting a student to introduce a topic and supply some opinion for it, perhaps with a reason. But then in second grade, the student is already expected to structure his or her writing in support of his or her claim. In fact, in some respects, the expectations for second-grade argument writing, at least in terms of the text of the standards, seem to extend well beyond those for the other two writing types. In second-grade information writing, the main emphasis seems to be only that the text includes a variety of details, whereas the expectations for argument writing are more extensive.

There are three important ideas that will help you study the Common Core standards for argument writing: the progression of expectations for opinion and argument writing is steep; the K–5 emphasis on opinion writing gives way to a 6–12 emphasis on argument writing (which includes counterargument and more critical weighing of sources, evidence, and logic); and writing arguments eventually includes using and evaluating sources, and using this analysis to power convincing arguments. The opinion and argument units in this series support this full progression of skills so that students develop research-based argument writing skills in fifth grade.

## The CCSS and Information Texts

To understand the Common Core State Standards for information writing, it is helpful to pause for a moment and think of all the information writing that students do in school. Although research reports and nonfiction books spring to mind right away, this category of writing is far broader than that. Information writing includes entries, Post-it® notes, summaries written in response to reading, lab reports, math records, and descriptions of and reflections on

movies, field trips, and books. Under the umbrella of the broad category, one also finds the answers students write in response to questions at the end of textbook chapters or questions discussed in class. The CCSS authors highlight the breadth of this type of writing in Appendix A.

Informational/explanatory writing includes a wide array of genres, including academic genres such as literary analyses, scientific and historical reports, summaries, and précis writing as well as forms of workplace and functional writing such as instructions, manuals, memos, reports, applications, and résumés. (23)

In essence, the skills required to write information texts are not just writing skills, they are learning skills. Let's clarify something before diving much further into this topic: although the rhetoric around the Common Core suggests that the standards call for exponentially increasing the amount of information writing done in school, this depends on the amount of writing teachers have done all along. The truth is that for teachers in grades K-5, the Common Core standards ask only that one-third of all the writing that students do across the entire day be information writing. That is, most of the writing in science, social studies, art, and computers all qualifies as information writing.

We think it's important to note that for many schools, the challenge is not the expectation that students devote a greater percentage of their writing to texts that fall under the broad umbrella of information writing (it is already commonplace for one-third of the writing that students do to be information writing). Rather, the challenge is that the Common Core expects students to apply the same standard of craftsmanship to information writing as they do to short stories, memoirs, and essays. That is, traditionally, when students wrote about reading (whether literature or history or science), the goal was for them to show that they had done the reading, gleaned the necessary knowledge, and

developed some thoughts. Prior to the arrival of the CCSS, it wasn't typical for their information writing to be held up to the same standards as essays and short stories. Now, a reader of the CCSS can quickly see that across all three kinds of writing, there is a parallel emphasis on writing in clear structures, on elaborating with specific information, on writing with details and examples, and on synthesizing the text so that the entire text advances key ideas or themes.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CCSS FOR WRITING AND THE UNITS OF STUDY SERIES

The standards, you'll recall, focus on expectations and not methods. They detail what students should know and be able to do; they do not specify practices that teachers must use to teach students the skills necessary to meet those expectations.

School districts and teachers are left to decide on an instructional program that will elevate the level of student writing so that all (or most) students reach these ambitious expectations. One can't help but think that an effort to meet the standards will require a planned, sequential, explicit writing program, with instruction that gives students repeated opportunities to practice each kind of writing and to receive explicit feedback at frequent intervals.

This new series offers one such program. The units of study in this series offer at least one highly developed unit devoted to each type of writing at each grade level. Within each unit of study, students are expected to write more than one piece (and sometimes a

multitude of pieces). The fact that students are given repeated opportunities to produce a particular kind of writing is important if we are going to hold students accountable to meet CCSS expectations. For anyone to become highly skilled at a specific type of writing, that person needs opportunities for

*For students to become highly skilled at specific types of writing, and be held accountable for meeting CCSS expectations, they need opportunities for repeated practice, not only within a unit of study but also across units and grades."*

repeated practice. In this series, these opportunities are given not only within a unit of study but also across units of study and grades.

## Progression and Transference across Units and Grades

Across all of the units, there is a continual emphasis on transference. For example, after students write persuasive speeches, they study another kind of persuasive writing—petitions—and ask, “How many of the strategies that we learned when writing persuasive speeches are applicable also when writing petitions?” This inquiry leads students to plunge right into the work of writing petitions without needing an elaborate introduction. The very design of the Common Core emphasizes the fact that students will be able to reach high-level expectations when skills are built on as students proceed through the grades. In this series, the cohesion across units means that skills that are introduced in one grade level are then recalled and developed in later units of study.

This development occurs within a type of writing and also across the full gamut of writing. That is, the standards’ expectations for one type of writing, at a grade level, are echoed in the other two types of writing. If students are expected to end their essays by referring back not only to the last paragraph but to their entire essay, they’ll encounter parallel expectations for their endings when writing narratives and information texts. It is helpful for students if teachers say, “You know the work you have been doing to make sure that the ending of your essay relates to the whole text, not just to the last bit of it? Well, when you write fiction, there are similar expectations for your endings. Let me explain and show you what I mean.”

You will want to study the standards so that you understand the way that expectations grow each year, with students being expected to produce work that stands on the shoulders of the preceding year. For example, first-graders are expected to write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic of the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason to support that opinion, and provide some sense of closure. By sixth grade, students are expected to write arguments (not opinions) to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. In these arguments, students are expected to introduce the claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly; support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources to demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text; use words, phrases, and

clauses to clarify the relationships among claims and reasons; establish a formal style; and provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the argument presented.

The standards not only describe the progression of skill development expected to occur across grades in a curriculum in which one grade builds on the next, but they also provide annotated exemplar texts to illustrate what these pieces of writing might look like and to answer the question, “How good is good enough?” When looking at the pieces provided as illustrations of one type of writing or another, it is important to note that even the pieces selected as exemplars do not adhere to all of the defining characteristics of a genre. For readers who are accustomed to teaching in writing workshops, it will be clear after just a glance that most of the exemplar pieces in Appendix B emerged out of writing workshop classrooms.

Exemplar pieces are important, and although the standards include a random sampling of some exemplars, they don’t show information, opinion, and narrative pieces that illustrate each of the standards they detail. This series does provide those benchmark texts in *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5*. Of course, once you teach these units, you will have files of student work from previous years that you can draw on, and you will want to do so.

If you are by any chance operating in isolation, a sort of lone champion of writing in your school, I encourage you to reach out in every possible way to your colleagues. Your influence on one class of writers will be multiplied tenfold if students receive instruction each year that builds on prior years, that makes sense to students, and that holds them accountable to transferring and applying their skills. To reach the Common Core standards, children will benefit from writing becoming a schoolwide vision.

## Writing across the Curriculum

Although the expectations for writing that are embedded in the CCSS mostly align to the research and teaching that the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project has been engaged in for the past thirty years, there have been important new challenges as well. First and foremost, the CCSS emphasize that writing needs to occur in disciplines and be supported by all teachers. Writing cannot be the province only of the language arts classroom. As part of this, the CCSS spotlight the importance of high standards for writing that

is done within the content areas. Children need to be able to structure their research reports, synthesize information, and explore the ramifications of evidence. This means that young people need explicit instruction and lots of opportunities to write within social studies and science, and to develop as writers of information and opinion texts. This series contains research-based units that are embedded in the content areas as well as in the writing workshop.

A word about balance. The standards not only define and describe the three kinds of writing and show how students' work within each of those kinds of writing should progress across the years, but they also call for a distribution of writing experiences that gives students roughly equal amounts of time and instruction in argument, informative, and narrative writing.

In the Common Core, the discussion of the distribution of writing between these types of texts is situated under the subheading of "Shared Responsibility" (4) as part of an emphasis on writing instruction belonging in the hands of all disciplines and every teacher. So, if fifth-grade students are expected to write narratives 35% of the time, information texts 35% of the time, and opinions/arguments 30% of the time, the balance between the three types of writing is expected to occur across math, social studies, science, gym, and music, as well as during writing workshop itself. Presumably, a good deal of the information writing will occur in science (lab reports), in math (math journals reflecting on the students' processes), in social studies (summaries of texts read, responses to questions asking students to synthesize information from several sources), and in reading (reading notebook entries, quick analytic jottings, preparations for partnership and book club conversations). This suggests that the CCSS recommend that a large portion of the writing done during the literacy or language arts block be narrative and opinion writing, although in this series, we support an equal distribution between the three types of writing.

The implications of the writing standards are clear. Writing must become part of the bill of rights for all students. Just as it would be unacceptable for a K-5 teacher to say, "Math's not really my thing," so too, in the world of the Common Core, it will be indefensible for a teacher, of any subject, to say, "Writing is not really my cup of tea."

## Teaching to and above the Standards

Throughout the series, you will see that the teaching often reflects standards one grade level above. There are several reasons for this. First, teaching

beyond the standards gives students the opportunity to reach toward the goal of working at highly proficient levels. Then too, as described previously, this means that students have additional time, when needed, to develop the skills they are expected to demonstrate. And finally, our research in thousands of writing classrooms has suggested that there are some places where the Common Core State Standards underestimate what K-5 students can do. This is especially true in the primary grades, where the writing standards progress more slowly than in the upper grades. This means that there are instances in which expectations accelerate at a rate that we believe is unrealistically steep—most notably between sixth and seventh grade. Our suggestion, then, is for K-5 teachers to aim to send students to sixth grade already having met many of the sixth-grade standards. This positions students to leave eighth grade meeting or exceeding CCSS expectations.

## THE WRITING PROCESS DESCRIBED IN THE STANDARDS AND TAUGHT IN THESE UNITS OF STUDY

While there is some dispute in this nation about methods for teaching *reading*, there is less dispute about methods for teaching *writing*. This is probably because while we don't have many public figures who are readers, there have been thousands of writers who have made their process public. There is near universal agreement that writers engage in a process of collecting, drafting, revising, and editing. You can see writers' drafts, with their many revisions, in library collections, online, and in books such as the *Author at Work* series. From Mark Twain to Bob Woodward, from novelists to journalists, writers draft and revise—sometimes rapidly and on the run, and sometimes over extended periods. It's no surprise, then, that the standards embrace the widely accepted writing process.

Writing standard 5 describes the writing process, and standard 10 describes the need to write routinely as part of that process. Both standards will be an integral part of attaining all the other writing standards as well. The grade-level specifics of anchor standard 5 are almost the same across all the grades. This standard says that students should be able to "develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, [and] editing" (18), with expectations for revision and independence increasing with age. Anchor standard 10 calls for students to "write routinely over extended time frames (time for research,



reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two)" (18). These are not low expectations! You'll find, as you dive deeper into these units, that tremendous attention is paid to on-demand writing at the start and end of each unit, and to students producing a volume of writing. Writing with velocity matters, as does writing to deadline.

Efficiency and fluency also matter. These skills come with writing often, which the standards call for students to do. "Write routinely" means to make writing a habit. Even noted writers describe how they have to push themselves to ensure that they write every day. Novelist Margaret Arwood, who has published dozens of fiction and nonfiction books and has received almost every known award for her writing, claims, "The fact is the blank pages inspire me with terror. What will I put on them? Will it be good enough? Will I have to throw it out? The trick is to sit at the desk anyway, every day" (Donald Murray, *Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers*, 1990, 72). It is not surprising that the standards emphasize writing often. Writing is just like any other practice—playing piano, running, knitting. The more opportunity you have for practice, the better you get. In these units, a day does not go by that your children are not writing. Across a week, they will write many pages. Inevitably, they will get better, faster, more fluent, more efficient, and more powerful.

A writing routine does not just come with sitting down to write, however. A writing routine involves understanding what it means to work at your writing. Writing anchor standard 5 states that writers will "develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach" (18). The CCSS are closely aligned, then, with the practices researched by Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Don Murray, documented in *A Writer Teaches Writing* (2003). Murray described how journalists learn, even when writing to deadline, to revise on the run, to try out different leads and endings, and to consider and reconsider each word, comma, and sentence structure to convey precise meaning. In other words, they know that writing is a process.

Volume is also related to rate, and the standards are very specific about the expectations for production. Fourth-graders are expected to produce a

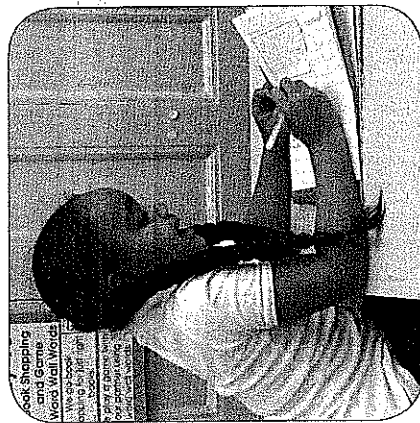
minimum of one typed page in a sitting, and fifth-graders, a minimum of two typed pages in a sitting. We have seen students sit down to write an on-demand piece at the end of a unit of study and regularly produce that much writing. When they know a lot about that which they are writing, their pencils will fly. When they are used to writing often, their fingers and minds will be ready. That level of production comes with practice.

This has led teachers to look closely at their schedules for writing, following a student across a week, seeing how much time is actually available for that student to write, and paying attention to how much writing he or she produces during one sitting. In every school where kids become powerful writers, they have extended time to write, and they write daily. Don Graves, pioneer reformer in writing instruction for children, often said

that if writers couldn't return to a piece of writing at least three times a week, it wasn't worth doing at all. The kids would just be too far away from their writing to remain committed to it (Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, 2003).

If you've ever practiced piano scales, you know that after a long stretch away from the piano, when you first sit down your fingers are slow. It's the same if you haven't exercised in a while or if you haven't picked up knitting needles in five years. You know the skills, but your legs or fingers don't respond with the speed they once did. On the other hand, as you begin to knit or run or play piano or write, you'll find that for every day you do it, the sheer discipline of moving your pen across the page or your fingers across the keyboard, you will become faster and more fluent.

A note about typing versus handwriting: in most schools, students are writing on paper, not computers, because computers are expensive. You'll see that most of the K–5 student pieces that are in Appendix C of the standards are handwritten. That said, if your students have easy access to technology, it is important to help them develop those skills. It appears upcoming high-stake assessments will be conducted via computers. You'll see, in the units of study, publishing options include podcasts, blogs, and other digital media, but ultimately, we've left the decision to highlight digital technology mostly in your hands.



## THE STANDARDS CALL FOR NEW LEVELS OF PROFICIENCY

While the CCSS are notable for requiring an equal division of time between three kinds of writing and for frequent opportunities to engage in the writing process, the most remarkable thing about the CCSS is the call for high levels of proficiency. The expectations are not high for the younger grades, but they escalate between grades 5–8. In grade 5, the lead paragraph to a narrative story should “orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally” (20). So the writer is supposed to introduce the conflict and its context, introduce the narrator and the characters, and launch a sequence of events. And all of that just describes the opening few lines to a story! Many teachers no doubt think, “Could I write like that, with that much power and concision, let alone teach an eleven-year-old to write like that?” The expectations are especially high when one looks at the eighth-grade sample texts included in Appendix C.

Let’s look at an example of a piece of writing from Appendix C (see [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_C.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_C.pdf)) that represents what kindergartners should be able to do as information writers:

To day befor we had rivda groos Mrs. John read us a story a baowt frogs. We had to riet a baowt frogs. We haf a tadpol in the sciens sentr. It has 2 bac ligs and wen it has 2 frunt ligs its tal disuprs and it can not yet wen its moot is chajin. Then the scknn gets to little and the frogs pol off thrr scknn an thaa eyt it. Saum of the frogs bloo baubools. Frogs lad eggs that look like jele and the fish yet some but some hach to tadpoos. It gros bigr and bigr and bigr.

The child has drawn on multiple sources of information, including observation and a text that was read aloud. The writer uses detail (“when it has 2 front legs its tail disappears”) and precise and even domain-specific language (*tadpole, hatch*) to describe the life cycle of a frog. The writer makes comparisons (“eggs that look like jelly”) and uses repetition for dramatic effect (“bigger and bigger and bigger”).

The pieces in the appendix are not all of even quality. Sometimes one type of writing at a grade level will represent what we might think are relatively low standards, while another piece, like this one, seems high. You’ll need to look

between the descriptors, the grade-level specifics in the standards—which tend to be rather low, especially in kindergarten and through fourth grade—and the pieces themselves to try to build a coherent vision of proficiency levels if you’re interested in doing this work. By the end of the year, you should be able to create your own Appendix C, with student exemplars from your community and curriculum.

The expectations for writing in the CCSS are also carried by anchor standard 4. At every grade level, starting in grade 3, standard 4 says that students are expected to “produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” (18). Note that a spotlight is placed on clarity and structure, as opposed to vividness or voice. This is interesting to us because we have often felt that one can look at various theories about writing instruction and ask, “Does this prioritize the sort of lush writing one finds in picture books, novels, and poems, or does it prioritize the lucid, clear writing that one finds in William Strunk and E. B. White’s *Elements of Style*?” The CCSS lean toward the latter.

## The Standards’ Emphasis on the Importance of Writing for Very Young Students

The important thing about the primary writing standards is that all of the skills considered to be essential for a student graduating from high school have their beginnings in the primary grades. The standards do not suggest that young kids write only stories and older students write just essays. Instead, kindergartners, like twelfth-graders, are given repeated practice in writing their opinions and then supporting those opinions with reasons. Kindergartners, like twelfth-graders, draft, revise, edit, and publish their writing. Implicit in the CCSS is the presence of a coherent, synthesized K–12 curriculum. A child who has been learning narrative craft for thirteen years should, by the end of twelfth grade, be extraordinarily skilled, ready to spin an anecdote from his or her own story into an engaging college essay or scholarship application. A child who wrote opinions in the primary grades, then moved to carefully constructed arguments in middle school, will be ready to embark on learning the skills needed to contextualize an argument, acknowledge and refute the counterargument, and analyze the research base and bias of sources.

Although this guide is for upper-elementary-grade teachers, the CCSS’ message to K–12 teachers matters to you. For you to do your job, it is important

that writing instruction in your school start in kindergarten. In thousands of schools across the nation, teachers start the kindergarten year by saying to children, "In this classroom, each one of you will be an author. Each one of you will write stories and letters and instructions and songs and all-about books." Although this teaching has spread like wildfire, it is still far from the norm. In the majority of classrooms, kindergarten is a time for socialization, for learning the alphabet, for perhaps copying the whole-class text with an emphasis on penmanship. The Common Core State Standards convey a crystal clear message opposed to this practice. The message is this: kindergartners can write. They can not only invent their own spellings and write with fluency and power but also write long, well-developed, shapely texts.

Look again at that sample piece for kindergarten included in Appendix C.

To day befor We had riyda groos Mrs. John red us a strorry a baowt  
 frogs. We had to riet a baowt frogs. We haf a tadpol in the sciens  
 sentr. It has 2 bac ligs and wen it has 2 frunt ligs its tal disuprs  
 and it can not yet wen its moot is chqjn. Then the soknn gets to  
 little and the frogs pol off thyr soknn an thaa eyt it. Saum of the  
 frogs bloo baubools. Frogs lad eggs that look like jele and the fish  
 yet some but some hach to tadpoos. It gros bigr and bigr and bigr.

Kindergarten teachers debate whether this piece is a realistic goal for all kindergarten children and they are right to do so. But the point that matters is that the CCSS say clearly that in order for upper-elementary teachers to

bring children to standards, the teaching of writing needs to be a whole-school priority. The standards acknowledge it will be hard for students to achieve the high level of craft that is expected of them if teachers haven't been moving them steadily along a progressing curriculum, extending their skills in each type of writing each year, and giving them clear expectations for their writing and feedback toward meeting those expectations. After all, in math, teachers ensure that students move through the grade levels with the essential skills that teachers have agreed on. That same focus on writing as content, as a set of skills, will move grade levels of students forward, rather than simply those students who happened to get this teacher or that.

Writing will need to be given its due, starting in kindergarten and continuing throughout the grades. Teachers will need to assess and teach writing, to track students' progress, and to plan interventions for those students who need extra help in writing. In short, writing will need to be treated just as math has been treated in the past. The standards give you a powerful voice in advocating for a writing curriculum and for time in the schedule for children to work on their writing.

The Common Core has been written, but the plan for implementing the Common Core has not. As challenging as it must have been to write this document and to finesse its adoption, that work is nothing compared to the work of teaching in ways that bring all students to these ambitious expectations. As you know by now, we've built these units intending to support you in doing just that.